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“This is Our Sanctuary”: Perceptions of Safety among Exotic Dancers in Baltimore, Maryland

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Abstract

Occupational safety researchers have increasingly recognized the important influence of social and structural factors on safety perception and behaviours in occupational settings. This qualitative study was conducted to explore the nature of the safety climate of exotic dance clubs in Baltimore, Maryland and the mechanisms through which this sexual geography informs dancers' perceptions of safety and experience of sex work. Structured observations and semi-structured qualitative interviews (N=40) were conducted with club dancers, doormen, managers, and bartenders from May through August, 2009. Data were analyzed using an inductive approach whereby themes emerged from the data itself. *Atlas-ti* was used for data analysis. Perceptions of safety within exotic dance clubs were born from an interplay between the physical, social, and symbolic environments. These perceptions were closely tied to dancers' construction of sex work inside versus outside of the club. Understanding the contextual factors, which influence how dancers understand and prioritize risk in their work settings, is crucial for creating policies and programs, which effectively reduce risk in this environment.

Keywords

sex work; strip club; safety; safety climate; sexual geography

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the influence of the structural and social environment on individual-level health behaviours (Berkman et al., 2000; Blakenship et al., 2006; Latkin et al., 2010; Rhodes and Singer, 2005; Shannon et al., 2008). Structural research in a broad range of public health fields including obesity, smoking, contraceptive use, violence, and HIV prevention, focuses on the mechanisms through which health determinants on multiple levels interact to influence behavioural outcomes (Heise, 1998;

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Latkin et al., 2010; Raneri and Wiemann, 2007; Reidpath et al., 2002; Stead et al., 2001). Occupational safety researchers have increasingly begun to examine the influence of social and structural factors on safety perception and behaviours in occupational settings (Cooper and Phillips, 2004; Zohar, 2000; Zohar and Luria, 2005). The “safety climate” has been defined as employees’ shared perceptions of safety policies, procedures, and practices, and the importance of safety at work (Griffin and Neal, 2000; Zohar, 1980). “Safety climate” and employee attitudes towards safety have been shown to contribute significantly to both individuals’ judgement of risk and occupational risk behaviour (Christian et al., 2009; Neal et al., 2000; Rundmo, 2000).

“Safety climate” is of particular relevance in the context of sex work. Sex work takes place in a range of environments, in which it is explicitly or directly (e.g., brothels) or indirectly (e.g., exotic dance clubs, massage parlours) conducted. We and others have found that a number of sexual services are offered in exotic dance clubs, ranging from dancing with no physical contact to vaginal and anal intercourse (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1999; Authors, 2011; Authors, 2011; Authors, 2011). The illegality of sex work in most settings precludes regulations protecting female sex workers (FSWs) and limits their ability to seek recourse when harmed, making violence a common cost of doing business (Rekart, 2005; UNAIDS, 2002). Worldwide, FSWs are subject to elevated rates of physical and sexual violence compared to the general population (Potterat et al., 2004). Violence has been recognized as a social and environmental factor, which hinders FSWs’ ability to practice risk reduction, often placing them at higher risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Shannon et al., 2008).

The level of violence associated with sex work is largely influenced by the physical and social environment in which it occurs. Venue based-sex work (e.g., brothels, massage parlours), which is often conducted in a more regulated environment, has been associated with lower rates of violence compared to street-based sex work (Church et al., 2001; De Graff and Van Zessen, 1996; Harcourt and Donovan, 2005; Plumridge and Abel, 2001; Seib et al., 2009; Ward et al., 1999). In a recent study of FSWs in Australia (N=247), over half of street-based FSWs reported being raped or bashed by a client compared to 3% of brothel based FSWs (Seib et al., 2009). Qualitative studies on North American exotic dance clubs have revealed that harassment and physical assault from clients are significant concerns among exotic dancers (Egan, 2004; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1999).

Despite the differential risk of violence associated with the various contexts in which sex work occurs, only a few studies have explored the “safety climate” in indoor sex-work venues. In brothels and massage parlours, formal and informal policies, the social obligation for FSWs to safeguard one another, and features of the built environment (e.g. security cameras) have been found to protect FSWs from the risk of violence (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Sanders and Campbell, 2007). However, the “safety climate” within exotic dance clubs and the mechanisms through which perceived safety influences health behaviour in this setting remain less well understood.

The work of sexual geographers such as Hubbard and McDowell points to the potentially important role of safety perceptions in the study of sexuality, space, and place in sex work venues (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003; McDowell, 1999). Previous research has suggested that “safety climate” may both shape and be shaped by sex workers’ interactions with the physical, social, and symbolic space they occupy (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Hubbard and Sanders, 2003; Sanders and Campbell, 2007). Hubbard and Sanders (2003), for example, found that sex workers in Birmingham, UK exercised both material and symbolic control over the environment they worked in by choosing safe places to exchange sex.

Several researchers, and in particular feminist geographers, have highlighted the important role of sexual geographies in the construction of identity and power (Hubbard, 2009; Hubbard and Sanders, 2003; McDowell, 1999). Identities are constantly being constructed and re-constructed as a result of interactions between people and their environments (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003; McDowell, 1999, 2009; Scambler, 2007). The context (moral, legal, social, physical) in which sex work takes place may have a profound influence on the personal and professional identities of the individuals who engage in it (McDowell, 2009). Power relations interact with the built and social environment in the creation of sex work geographies. The creation of red-light districts through zoning and licensing policy is perhaps the most obvious outward manifestation of power relations in geographies of sex work (Hubbard, 2009; Hubbard et al., 2009; Hubbard and Sanders, 2003).

One such red-light district, and the focus of the current study, is The Block, located in downtown Baltimore, Maryland. The Block is comprised of approximately twenty exotic dance clubs, bars, fast food restaurants, and other adult-entertainment establishments. In the past sixty years, The Block has transitioned from a several block long strip known for its burlesque houses to a 1.5 block segment consisting primarily of bars and exotic dance clubs. Accompanying this transition, The Block has become increasingly known for drug-related activity (Smith, 2000). Despite the illegal status of prostitution in Baltimore City, as far back as the 1940s, investigations suggested that bars and clubs on the Block were involved in promotion and facilitation of sex work (Hill, 2008).

This study aimed to describe how the geography of exotic dance clubs in Baltimore, Maryland informed dancers' perceptions of safety and experience of sex work inside the clubs. This study found that the way in which exotic dancers experienced their environment was highly influenced by their perceptions of safety both inside and outside of the exotic dance club.

Methods

From May through August 2009, a qualitative study was conducted on The Block. The study was comprised of 40 in-depth individual interviews with female dancers (n=25) and staff (n=15) in addition to observations of the clubs. The three study staff, who conducted observations and interviews, were female graduate students in their mid to late 20s, two of whom were White and one of whom was Indian.

Observations

Semi-structured observations were conducted to examine the physical structure of specific exotic dance clubs as well as the nature of social interactions between dancers, staff, and patrons. Over a two-month period, a total of ten observations were conducted by three researchers and, to help ensure accuracy, were recorded on a structured form either during or immediately after fieldwork. Information was collected on the clubs' layout, lighting, presence of video cameras, and relevant signage as well as details regarding the numbers and demographics of dancers, staff, and clients as well as their activities within and outside of the clubs and interactions with each other. Observations took place between the hours of 7 and 10:30 at night. To gain entrance to the clubs, over a period of a few weeks, the study staff established relationships with doormen and club managers, explaining who we were and the purpose of our work. Once entrance to the club was granted, we engaged with club dancers, bartenders, and clients through informal conversation while conducting observations. Although study team members were clearly identified by club staff as "outsiders", these initial observations provided us with the opportunity to normalize our presence inside the clubs, helping with future access to the study population. Additional

unstructured observations as well as informal conversations with dancers and staff took place throughout the study period.

Interviews

Sampling of interviewees was primarily opportunistic however, efforts were made to attain variation in primary club of employment, length of time working on the Block, race, and profession (for non-dancer staff). Staff included club doormen, managers, runners, and bartenders. Potential participants were recruited in two ways. They were either approached individually by one of three trained interviewers (all female) in exotic dance clubs or on the street outside of the clubs, or referred to the study by staff from the Baltimore City Health Department's Needle Exchange Program, which provides services on the Block one night per week. Inclusion criteria for this study consisted of being 18 years of age or older, currently or formerly employed on the Block, and demonstrated articulateness and willingness to talk. The purpose of the study was explained to participants before informed consent was obtained orally. A minority of participants were known to the interviewers before the interview was conducted, either through informal interactions that took place during the study period or based on their previous participation in a larger, quantitative study of HIV risk behaviour on the Block (Authors, 2011; Authors, 2011).

Interviews were conducted in cars, private areas in the strip clubs, restaurants near the strip clubs, and the Baltimore City Health Department's Needle Exchange Program van by the three trained interviewers. Interviews were semi-structured and facilitated through the use of an interview guide that explored the physical and social environment within the club, policing environment on the Block, participants' history working on the Block, drug use and sex within the clubs, and safety within the clubs. In general, topics moved from less to more sensitive, however interviewers were permitted flexibility to discuss topics as they naturally arose in conversation and to probe relevant information that was not anticipated by the guide. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. After the interview, short quantitative questionnaires were administered to collect information on age, ethnicity, length of time working on the Block, number of clubs worked in, number of children, and drug use history. Participants were compensated \$25 for their time. The study was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using an inductive approach whereby themes emerged from the data itself. A cross-section of transcripts was coded by hand by the study's authors to create a draft coding scheme containing key themes and sub-codes within these themes. The draft coding scheme was then applied to additional interviews and modified as new themes arose. A final coding scheme was developed upon consensus. Transcripts were then entered into the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti version 5.0 (Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany), which provides tools to organize and analyze textual data. Data was coded to categorize texts across interviews and analyzed for recurring themes, concepts, and terms.

Results

Dancers ages ranged from 19 to 42 with a median age of 24 years. Staff members were aged 20 to 53 with a median age of 33 years. All of the dancers interviewed were women and 13 percent of staff were women. Fifty-five percent of participants were White, 35 percent were African American, and 10 percent were mixed race/ethnicity or Asian. Participants worked

on the Block from three weeks to 28 years with an average length of six years. Dancers worked in a median of five clubs and staff worked in a median of three clubs.

Our results illustrate that among exotic dancers, perceptions of safety within exotic dance clubs were born from an interplay between the physical, social and symbolic environments. These perceptions were closely tied to dancers' construction of sex work inside versus outside of the strip club environment.

Perceived Safety in the Landscape of the Strip Club

Physical Environment—At the club level, the physical environments of the clubs played a role in dancers' perceptions of safety. The club layouts were designed so that interactions between dancers and customers could be closely monitored by bartenders and managers. Large mirrors were situated throughout the clubs, often behind the stage, on the opposing wall, on the ceiling, and within the lap dance area. Lap dance sections were fully or partially open and visible from the bar. In a few of the clubs, video cameras were installed near the bar. A number of dancers described perceptions of safety engendered by these structural protection mechanisms. When asked where the lap dance area was located, one 33 year old dancer replied, "It's just the little curtained area. But it's got all the mirrors around the whole thing, you can see. Big mirrors everywhere so we can see, you know. They're very safe here. I feel very safe here." Another dancer described the video cameras:

We have someone that does watch them. If they see something they'll come charging down the steps. He'll watch- he's like behind the scenes. He'll sit and watch the camera. If he sees something he don't like he will be on stage. You don't even know he's here but he's here. So we feel pretty secure in here. (Dancer, 42 years old)

Clothing restrictions were imposed on clients as a formal attempt to prevent violence within the club. Doormen described club dress codes, which prohibited plain white t-shirts, do-rags (a piece of cloth used to cover the hair, most commonly worn among African American men in the United States), and baggy pants, as a means to keep "thugs" and "gang members" out of the strip clubs. These customers, who were often described as young African American males, were associated with fights, dealing drugs, and giving cheap tips. When asked if there was a specific type of client clubs try to keep out, one doorman responded:

Yeah, a young black man.... 'Cause of the economic of the customer. And you're not going to have to drag an older white guy out, you know what I'm saying, who has a family in Pasadena and a business, and he ain't trying to get locked up down the block and have that shit put in the paper, you know what I mean? He just wants to do what he wants to do and get out, where the young black male doesn't give a shit. He's been locked up a thousand times before. Plans he'll go into prison sometime this year anyway, so... doesn't care. So we don't want them in. I try to screen them out. I'll say, "You got to be 25. You can't have baggy pants. You can't have a hat. You can't have a do-rag," you know, regular down the line. (Doorman, 47 years old)

Social Environment—Employees' job responsibilities and support from co-workers contributed to dancers' perceptions of safety in the club at the interpersonal level. Narratives expressed the obligation of all club employees to protect dancers should they encounter problems with a customer. In the case of doormen and bouncers, this protection was a formal duty. However, dancers also described the social expectation to defend one another if a dangerous situation were to arise. This support, which was perceived as being reliable and unconditional, provoked feelings of security among dancers interviewed. When asked

whether she felt safe in the club, one dancer expressed her confidence in this system of both formal and informal protection:

Yes, you have to feel safe inside because you got the bouncers. You got the doormen. You got the bartenders. Also you got your girls, so one guy want to fight one girl, he got to watch out because you might get jumped less than 10 minutes in there. (Dancer, 24 years old)

Another 25 year old dancer recalled her relationship with a former manager:

A lot of the managers, a lot of the owners of a lot of these clubs, a lot of them do protect the girls that they have.... I called my manager "daddy". A lot of us girls did. Especially ones that been there for a while. We all called him daddy. He was our protector. Anytime we had problems, all we had to do was say something to him and he was real quick to get whoever it was that was causing the problem out of the club!

The social protection mechanisms within the club were found to be not just reactive but preventive as well. Some dancers described checking-in on colleagues with clients, both at the bar and in the VIP room, to ensure no problems had arisen. In some clubs, bouncers were tasked with periodically knocking on the door of the club's VIP room when sexual exchanges or private lap dances were taking place inside.

Perceptions of safety were additionally borne from shared attitudes regarding trust and control within the strip club. A number of participants distinguished between trust based on emotion, for example, keeping secrets or not gossiping about other dancers, and trust based on physical protection or "having each others' backs" in a physical fight. While staff and dancers described low levels of emotional trust within the strip club, high levels of physical trust were close to universal. When asked whether he trusted people on the Block a 25 year old doorman shook his head "no" responding:

I don't trust anybody... see, with me, there's a difference between trust and-- like, I would trust people down here with my life. There's people down here I know would take a bullet for me, you know? But I don't-- I don't really know how to explain it. Trust is a big word for me. It's a real big concept. I don't trust anybody. I trust me. I don't trust anyone.

Physical trust was said to supersede any violations of emotional trust resulting from interpersonal conflicts or grudges. Dancers who experienced conflicts with other staff members in the club expressed confidence that the individuals would still support them should they find themselves in a dangerous situation. One dancer described her relationship with a former best friend:

[When leaving the club with a customer], I always tell somebody- I used to tell my best friend- or somebody where I'm going, who I'm with. I try to give them their name, their number- as much information as I can get- their tag number, try to give that. Even if I'm not talking to that girl. I would still do that to this day, because me and her have this thing where she knows if something happens to me, even though we're not talking, she's going to do something about it. (Dancer, 23 years old)

Attitudes regarding control were closely bound to perceptions of safety within the strip club. Numerous dancers and staff described the strip club as a controlled environment where bouncers and bartenders had the power to prevent and manage customer violence. One 24 year old dancer contrasted a bar on the Block where street-based sex workers meet customers to the controlled environment of the strip club:

The owners, the bartenders and the management they got control down here.... [this bar] is just like a regular bar. You can go in there and find a date for \$10.00, \$20.00, \$30.00 and there's nothing that they can do because it's like a bar where you sit down. But if you at a club... They have more control over everything.

Symbolic Environment—

It's just a bad environment, the street. Nothing about the club, it's just the street... it's dirty. Somebody could snatch you off the street at any time. That's all it is. Nothing, you know, to do with, like the clubs or anything. It's just a bad street. It's a bad neighbourhood. It's a bad part of town. (Dancer, 21 years old)

Juxtaposed against the perceived danger of outside, for many dancers, the exotic dance club became a metaphor or symbol of safety and protection. A number of dancers and staff described the street outside the clubs as a threatening and unsafe environment. Without the protective mechanisms of the club, dancers expressed worry about being harassed, "snatched", raped, or murdered. Fears of the outside were often supported by popular stories of dancers who had been kidnapped or brutally killed on the Block. As one 22 year old dancer recalled, "You heard about the murders and everything down here? Yes! Yes. Yeah, they found a girl—I think a couple weeks ago with her neck sliced. Somewhere down here in a dumpster."

Several dancers employed personal measures to avoid the outside by taking taxis directly to and from the club or being picked up at the door at the end of their shifts by a family member, friend, or partner. Club regulations, which required dancers to remain in the club during their shifts were seen as further protecting them from the outside. Dancers' perceptions of bartenders and bouncers as "protectors" were supported by their efforts to keep dancers from exposure to the street. As one 42 year old dancer described, "The bartender will make sure we all get a ride or he'll take you home himself. He will make sure that you got home safe. He wouldn't allow you to venture out."

The perceived danger of outside, enhanced dancers' perception of the club as a safe environment. As a 42 year old dancer explained, "When I leave here, my brother picks me up at the door, I'm gone. That's it. I get home. Nobody outside the club because this is our sanctuary, it's safe in here."

Perceived Safety and Sex Work

Numerous dancers who were unwilling to sell sex outside of the club, reported selling vaginal, oral, and anal sex inside the club. The majority of these women made clear distinctions between selling sex inside and outside of the club based on the perceived level of physical risk associated with each behaviour. The strip club was perceived as an environment, which insulated dancers from the risk of physical violence associated with street-based sex work. When asked whether she sold sex outside of the club, a 24 year old dancer who reported regularly selling sex inside the strip club responded:

No. It's not safe. [Have you ever done that?] No, because I heard many stories that if you meet a guy out there you don't know what kind of guy you're meeting. He might kill you. He might do anything to you, so you really don't know what you're getting yourself into down here. That's why I don't do that because my life's too short to do something like that.

Another 23 year old dancer who reported selling sex in the club described the main difference between selling sex inside and outside as safety:

It's safety to me, because, if I was to get into a vehicle or go into a house or a hotel room with somebody, anything could happen to me. I mean, they could kill me or they could rape me or there could be other people waiting there to rape me. When I'm in the club, I feel safer. There's a lot of people around. You know, we're in the building and, you know, I can just scream or I could get up and, you know, the guy would be caught and that's pretty much why I only stay in the club.

Several dancers, who were unwilling to meet customers on the street, used the safe environment of the club as a venue for "screening" customers before selling sex to them outside of the club. The transaction could either take place as a "buy-out" when the customer pays the club to leave with the dancer, or independently of the club. Dancers described screening customers based on the amount of money and time they had dedicated to them and whether or not they felt safe with them. This process was perceived as reducing the risk involved in selling sex. When asked whether she ever met clients from the strip club outside, a 22 year old dancer replied:

Yes, I have. I've done that a few times... there's certain people that I feel comfortable with. I usually have to do something with them in the club first before I would consider it.... I think it helps me read them a little bit better, to understand how they act, if they're going to be rough, if they're going to try to act like aggressive towards me, or they're going to try to force themselves, or something like that.

"Othering" of Street-Based Sex Workers

They go downstairs or upstairs, wherever the rooms are in the club... which I think is stupid, you know? Personally, if I was going to do that, I wouldn't do it for somebody else, you know? I mean, really. But they do 'cause they feel safer, I guess. You know? I guess somehow in their mind, it justified that they ain't on a corner, so they ain't prostitutes or whatever, but it's-- I mean-- you know. (Doorman, 47 years old)

It was common for dancers who sold sex within the strip club to characterize street-based FSWs as the "other", women whose behaviour made them inherently different from the participant. A number of participants illustrated this difference by narrating the circumstances under which they decided not to become one of "them". One dancer's story exemplified this pattern:

And I realize a lot of girls got-- was out tricking because they want to get that high. Because at one point, when I did get a couple of good hits, I didn't have no money. I was, like, "Shit, I've got to go out and make \$40 right now and get some more." And like every time I walked down the street, I had horn-- like, cars blowing their horns at me and shit. I was, like, "No, no, no, no. It's not for me. No. I don't need it." And that's whenever I realized I don't want to wind up like everybody else. That I've been talking bad about these girls out here tricking so they can get high or whatever. I was, like, "I don't want to be one of them." So I stopped. (Dancer, 27 years)

When asked what the main difference was between selling sex on the street versus in the club, the same dancer replied,

... you've got people around that if you yell, somebody can hear you and come running. But if you're out on the street and you go up an alley or abandoned house or something, you go to scream, you've got nobody to hear you. Or if they do hear you, they don't give a fuck, 'cause they don't know you.

Like many of the dancers interviewed, she highlighted safety from physical violence as the primary factor, which made sex work within the strip club different from and superior to street-based sex work.

A similar dichotomization was found within the strip clubs themselves. Several dancers, who reported only selling sex within the exotic club, drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and other dancers who were known to also sell sex outside of the club's walls. They largely described these dancers as drug-addicted, irrational, and willing to risk their own safety in order to earn money to support their drug habit.

But when you're addicted to stuff, a lot of times all you can think about is getting the money for your next fix. And those are the girls that don't care, are not scared, and will do anything and everything to get their money. And those are the girls that I worry about because the girls that I associate with, and the girls that are like me, who don't take them types of risks, are the ones that'll probably be down here for years to come because you're not gonna find them dead on the street somewhere. (Dancer, 25 years old)

The "othering" of dancers who sold sex on the street served the dual purposes of emphasizing the relative safety of sex work within the exotic dance club and allowing dancers to legitimize their own participation in sex work based on this perception.

A few dancers did acknowledge that the boundaries between selling sex on the street versus in the club were much more blurred, while still emphasizing the primacy of safety in club-based sex work. As one dancer described:

...you know, I've never walked the streets before. I've never, like, prostituted myself outside, even though, you know, girls in the club try talking me into going out on the streets with them and stuff and I just-- I didn't want to do that. I kind of feel safer in the club, although it's still prostitution, you know, just because it's in a club in closed doors doesn't mean, you know, it doesn't make it right or anything like that. (Dancer, 22 years old)

Discussion

The current study found that perceptions of safety within exotic dance clubs were born from an interplay between the physical, social, and symbolic environments. Similar to indoor sex work venues in Nevada and Birmingham, England, this study found that brothel policies, a built environment which ensured visibility of dancers and their clients, and shared feelings of trust and control among dancers and staff were key features of the clubs' safety climate (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Sanders and Campbell, 2007). Our findings build upon previous research by highlighting the contribution of the clubs' symbolic environment to dancers' perceptions of safety, which were closely tied to their construction of sex work inside versus outside of the club. They further contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms through which perceived safety may influence health behaviour within exotic dance clubs.

Understanding how individuals interact with their environment is crucial for creating policies and programs, which effectively reduce risk. An important aspect of safety climate is the prioritization of physical safety within a workplace relative to other risks (Zohar, 2010). Sanders (2004) argues that a common assumption underlying sex work literature is that risk is characterized by STI-related health concerns and substance use. On the contrary, we found that the threat of violence was particularly salient among exotic dancers and the narrative surrounding safety within exotic dance clubs was almost entirely focused on protection from violence perpetrated by customers. These findings add to a growing body of

literature, which acknowledges the existence of a “hierarchy of harms” among FSWs in which physical violence is prioritized over dangers related to sexual health (Katsulis et al., 2010; Romero-Daza et al., 2003; Sanders, 2004, 2005). Research suggests that this hierarchy may lead to trade-offs in which avoidance of violence is prioritized over condom use, among other HIV prevention practices (Katsulis et al., 2010; Romero-Daza et al., 2003; Shannon et al., 2008). Therefore, it is crucial that interventions which seek to reduce HIV risk behaviour among exotic dancers acknowledge and address the range of perceived harms present in this environment. This study further underscores the complex relationship between perceived safety and HIV risk in exotic dance clubs, providing support to the increasing body of research, which suggests that geographies can simultaneously produce risk and health (Latkin et al., 2010; Rhodes and Singer, 2005; Yamanis et al., 2010). Our results demonstrate that the clubs’ built, social, and symbolic environments were created to respond to and minimize the risk of physical and sexual violence associated with sex work, generating a high level of perceived safety among exotic dancers and staff. Exchanging sex within the perceived “safe” club environment rather than outside the club was for dancers a very real form of HIV risk reduction.

Yet, for many dancers, the decision to engage in sex work at all (and subject themselves to its risks) was also influenced by perceptions of the clubs’ safety climate. The association of high levels of perceived physical safety with decreased perceptions of risk in other work settings (Huang et al., 2007) was echoed in the club environment where, for several participants, the safety climate of the club validated a behaviour, which was otherwise described as dangerous and inferior. The symbolic dichotomization between inside and outside the strip club served as a platform to differentiate club-based sex work, and club based sex workers, from street based sex work and the women who participated in it, providing greater legitimacy to the former while stigmatizing the latter. Thus, a number of dancers who outwardly expressed contempt for the behaviour of street-based FSWs, willingly participated in sex work within the club. Similarly, several dancers refused to sell sex to clients encountered on the street but willingly sold sex outside the club to customers who they had first met and “screened” inside. Hubbard and Sanders found that street-based sex workers in the United Kingdom similarly sought to protect their own self-identity by restricting the types of space in which they were willing to perform sexual transactions (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003).

While reduction of violence is one important component of harm reduction, our research suggests that the broad sense of safety created by the strip club environment may have influenced dancers to engage in other risky behaviours (ie. selling sex) that could compromise their health. Sexual geographers have found that the ability to control the space they work in is perceived by some sex workers as a crucial component towards reducing the risks associated with their work (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003). The level of security FSWs’ perceive in their interactions with clients may influence their decisions regarding condom use (Shannon et al., 2008). Although beyond the scope of this study, the relationship between perceived safety and condom use is an important component of HIV risk in the exotic dance club, which merits additional research.

Notably, the same physical and social security mechanisms which contributed to a high-level safety climate within the strip clubs, were also indicative of power relations within this space. The strategic placement of mirrors within clubs and visibility of lap dance areas from the bar served the dual purpose of protecting dancers and controlling their sexual behaviour. Several dancers described bartenders closely observing interactions in the lap dance area to ensure they were not making sexual transactions that customers had not first paid for at the bar. These findings, echoed in other studies of sex work environments (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Egan, 2004), further highlight the important role of powerful groups (in

this case club management) in determining which sexual practices are permitted to exist in which spaces (Hubbard, 2009; Hubbard et al., 2009; Hubbard and Sanders, 2003).

Several considerations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings of this study. First, data collection was not initiated with the objective of understanding safety within the clubs. Rather, this concept arose from the data as a recurring theme throughout observations and interviews. Second, although this study seeks to represent safety as it is experienced by dancers and staff on the Block, it is important to acknowledge the role of the researcher in both collecting and interpreting data. Although the interviewers developed a strong rapport with participants throughout the interview process and are confident in the data's reflection of dancers' lived experiences, the findings represent the experience of participants as they chose to present it to the interviewers. Additionally, the interpretation of the data is inevitably subject to the researchers' own background and biases which are informed by a set of life experiences that differ from those of the participants. Last, although sampling was aimed towards attaining variation in participants' demographics and profession, the study sample consists of volunteers and thus the experiences of some employees on the Block may not be adequately represented by these findings.

In spite of these potential limitations, this study has several strengths. First, it hopes to contribute to our understanding of how the physical, social, and symbolic environment contribute to dancers' perceptions of safety within exotic dance clubs, expanding the application of safety climate research beyond its traditional settings. Second, it highlights the salience of violence and, correspondingly, perceived protection from violence, as contextual factors that influence how dancers understand and prioritize risk in their work settings. These crucial considerations for policy and programming may assist in the development of targeted and effective harm reduction interventions.

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Highlights

- A dearth of research has explored the safety environment in exotic dance clubs.
- We conduct observations and in-depth interviews with strip club dancers and staff.
- Clubs' physical, social and symbolic environments contribute to perceived safety.
- Perceived Safety Is Tied To Construction Of Sex Work Inside Versus Outside The Club.